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FM AMCONSUL JEDDAH
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9118
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHTH/AMEMBASSY ATHENS PRIORITY 0111
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 1361
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 1439
RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH PRIORITY 6457
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L JEDDAH 000333

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/30/2016

TAGS: KIRF PGOV PHUM SA SOCI

SUBJECT: FACING DECLINE, ONCE LARGE GREEK ORTHODOX COMMUNITY PERSISTS IN RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

REF: A. JEDDAH 00237
1B. JEDDAH 00308
1C. JEDDAH 00328

Classified By: Consul General Tatiana C. Gfoeller for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) As part of the Consulate's ongoing efforts to conduct a long-term inquiry into Christian worship in Jeddah, the Consul General attended a Greek Orthodox Easter liturgy (the Orthodox mass) on April 23 held at the Greek Community Compound in Jeddah (see reflets). Hosted by the Greek Consul General Dimitrios Zazoritis, the service included approximately 200 worshippers, ranging from the elderly to small children. Throughout the event, parishioners lamented the decline of the Greek presence in Jeddah, which had once numbered several thousand, to a mere 500. This was attributed to the exodus of large numbers of expats following the terrorist attacks of recent years. Of particular concern to attendees was the closure of the compound's school, which had also served as a church where weekly liturgies were held by the principal, an ordained Orthodox priest. After the lack of students made continued operation of the school untenable, the priest returned to his native Greek island, and, utilizing the tithing he had accumulated in Jeddah, opened a grocery store. (NOTE: The practice of having a job outside the clergy is common among Orthodox priests, who often do not receive any monetary compensation from their parish in exchange for their services.)

¶2. (C) According to parishioners, the difficulty in securing entry permission for priests solely for major religious celebrations has become increasingly prohibitive. Many alluded to the fact that Father George, who presided over this year's Easter celebration, had to be "smuggled" in from Athens, though no additional information was disclosed.

¶3. (C) In addition, the community has consistently been unable to find wine for use in the communion rites. In a conversation with the CG, the commercial officer from the Greek Consulate indicated that all alcohol shipments to the Consulate (permitted to most diplomatic missions in the Kingdom by the Saudi government) were halted 10 years ago following the arrest of a Greek businessman for selling illicit liquor. The wine used in the most recent Easter service had only been procured at the last moment when

someone hid it in their luggage on a return from Egypt. The condition of the church, now used only intermittently for major religious celebrations, was indicative of the community's decline: The iconstasis, usually an elegant fixture of Orthodox churches, consisted of flimsy woodboard with curtains while the icons appeared to be newspaper cutouts.

¶4. (C) NOTE: Prior to attending the Easter liturgy, the CG visited a local gourmet market to purchase traditional Easter foods and was surprised to see a shelf of brightly-colored, though smashed, Easter eggs displayed in the store. This reminded the CG of a similar incident during her previous tour in the Kingdom in the late-1980s when the mutawwa (the quasi-official religious police) had raided a Riyadh store to smash several bunches of Christmas ornaments that had been on sale there.

Gfoeller